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IN THIS ISSUE

Parent Connect

Happy Stress-Less Holidays

Cover Page & 4

Positive Parenting

The Absent Parent and the Holidays

Page 10

Job Market

A Little Extra Jingle in Your Pocket: Made Possible by a Part-Time Job

Pages 6-8

Family Room

The Timeless Gift of Reading

Pages 2-3

Family Holiday Traditions

Page 5

Marketplace

The Art of Giving

Page 9

Frugal Ways to Entertain

Page 5

HAPPY STRESS-LESS HOLIDAYS

No matter what holiday you observe, this season is a time to celebrate with family, friends and loved ones. This year, worries about the economy and loss of jobs might have you saying Bah Humbug! While you like to spread good tidings, you may feel as though your family experiences more anxiety, fatigue, and nagging than cheer. So, is there anything you can do to bring sanity back to the holidays? We think so.

It's All About Me

Overindulgence and "me" attitudes are often prominent during the holidays. From the time the first toy or gadget commercial is aired, how many times do you hear "I want that"? While materialistic traditions encourage gift-giving, it's not always monetarily possible. There are ways to feel merry without buying gifts.

One family suggests this: chat with each family member about what makes him happy during the holidays and what causes stress. Does she enjoy attending a friend's party or baking at home? Maybe it's the tradition of lighting the menorah together or decorating the tree as a family. Prioritize your holidays around these things. Consider saying no to

events that you've never really enjoyed but attend out of obligations. Remember: "If you always do what you've always done, then you'll always get what you've always gotten". If what you've been doing brings you stress, then you might not want to keep doing it. By weeding out unnecessary activities and expenses, it really can be all about the "me's" in your family.

Renew Your Spirit

Think back to your favorite holiday memories. Chances are that they revolved around simplicity. What makes you feel refreshed and rested rather than frazzled and exhausted? Is it a church or synagogue service? Watching an old holiday movie as a family? Curling up by the fire with a good book and a cup of hot cocoa? Schedule several of these nurturing times for yourself and encourage your family to do the same.

Build in quiet times when you and your kids unplug and unwind. Reading The Story of Hanukkah or The Christmas Story, dusting off old board games or walking the neighborhood to spy the kookiest neighborhood decorations are quickly becoming the new-old tradition.

Continued on page 4

The Timeless Gift of Reading

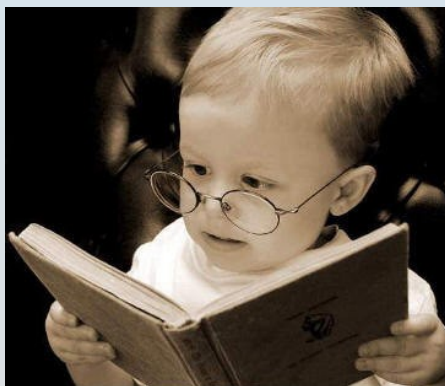
Reading with your child is the best way to prepare him for learning to read and to keep him reading as he grows. Reading aloud together creates a special time for you to bond with your child. This priceless gift offers your precious one what he cherishes most: your attention. The reward to you: it gives you a chance to rediscover favorite stories and find new ones. And the added bonus is that it doesn't have to cost a penny.

Somehow we think we should magically know how to read with our child. If you were fortunate enough to have memories of similar experiences with your own parent, it will come naturally. Just tap into your fondest memories of that activity. If not, don't fret. We've got some tips for you to use today.

Reading with Infants and Toddlers

Reading to infants and toddlers promotes language achievement and literacy development. Later on, it will reap achievement in reading comprehension and overall success in school.

- At this age, it technically doesn't matter if you are reading a cookbook or magazine article. What does matter is exposing your little one to vocabulary and a connection to print. Your infant and toddler responds to the colorful illustrations, the fluctuation in your voice and especially rhyming words.
- Cuddle together in a comfortable setting, place the book in front of her, and read aloud the title and author. As you read through the book, let her touch the pages, encouraging respect for the written word by instructing her not to bite or tear it.
- Talk with your baby about what you are reading. Put yourself into the story by using funny voices, stopping to point out things in the illustrations and allowing him to touch pictures as you go.
- Remember that your child's attention span is short, so it's okay to stop reading if he becomes distracted or fussy. Don't be afraid to start the story and finish it later.



Reading with Young Children

As your child gets older and more exposed to books, let him choose the title he wants you to read. You may find that he wants to read the same book over and over, even if he's outgrown it. While this might be boring for you, the repetition and familiarity of the story, including the child helping tell it or "read" it as he gets older, is part of the magic.

- Let your child hold the book. As you look at the cover, ask her what she thinks the story is about.
- As you read, discuss things that your child may have in common with the characters or setting of the story.
 - Change your voice to fit the mood or action. Move your finger under the words as you read them.
 - Talk about the pictures. Ask him to describe the illustrations. Explain words and phrases as you read. Allow him to ask questions or make comments.
- Let your child "read" the book to you. It may be a short story or a long imaginative tale. Listen and ask questions to encourage creativity.



Some material used by permission and adapted from The Tradition of Reading During the Holidays by Cathy P. Miller, President, TLA, Inc. Home of the Literacy Ambassador® 256-883-7005 cathytmiller@comcast.net www.readingisforeveryone.org

Some material adapted from Reading is Fundamental at www.rif.org

Reading with Tweens and Teens

Today's tweens and teens are over-stimulated by video games and TV and the thought of reading a book for pleasure might leave them disinterested. This doesn't mean they have to stop reading altogether. There are plenty of ways to keep reading beyond the books.

- Tune into the interests your child has. If he loves a particular sport, provide ways for him to learn more about it through articles, brochures, tip sheets and reviews. Magazines and newspapers often have sections geared toward your child and are generally written from a kid's point of view. He can identify with the tone and subject matter of magazines that you consider "fluffy."
- With all of the immediate access, kids are more in tune with music than ever. Let a music-obsessed child read lyrics to her favorite music. Many CD liners provide the lyrics or she can search online. While there, she can also read about the artist, songwriter and behind the scene info on the video.
- Tweens and Teens are striving for independence, yet still want to be connected to their families. Let her see you reading your favorite book and explain why it's important to you. Create a tradition of exchanging books with each other (sharing only books that are appropriate reading for her). This will give you insight into her world while nurturing her desire for connection.
- Trends are revealing an increased interest in local and national events among this age. Share editorials and newspaper articles, discussing them after.
- Tweens and teens are thinking about what they will do in their lives-college, careers, their future families. Lead him to books that introduce a wide range of opportunities and experiences.
- Rather than picking a movie based on its packaging, take your child to the rental store and read the story description on the back. Challenge her to find a good story based on the plot rather than the marketing.

If you begin reading to your child when he is young, he is much more likely to become a reader himself. If you missed out on reading to your child when he was young, it's not too late. One way to encourage any age child to read, is to let him see you reading for pleasure often. By reading with your child, not only will you give him a bright future in his education, but you'll create connections that will last a lifetime.

Choosing Books for Children of All Ages

Try out different books to see which one appeals to your child.

As soon as your child starts showing preference for one over another, let him choose his own book.

Guide your child to books that are related to his own interests.

Visit the library frequently and get to know the librarian, who can be a great resource.

Unless requested by her teacher, if your child does not like a book, put it away. Reading is a fun time to share, not a time to fight.



Stay on Budget

The best gift to you and your family is to not over-extend yourself financially. Some people feel guilty about not being able to afford presents so they pull out the credit card, only to find in January that they still can't afford it. Don't let your holiday joy turn to January regret. Financial planners say to make a cash budget and **STICK TO IT**. One way to do this is to put money on a prepaid credit card, which permits you to spend only funds you've deposited while allowing you access to in-store and on-line merchants. You can reload the card as needed.

Here are some other suggestions:

- Take all credit cards, except your prepaid card, out of your wallet.
- Set a holiday budget (don't forget non-gift items like cards, stamps, décor and food). Write it down and keep up with your expenses.
- Just use cash. When you get paid, take out cash and divide it into envelopes marked gifts, food, etc. When envelopes are empty, stop spending.

Get Organized Early

You've already talked with your family about their choice for the season's festivities, now you need to organize it all.

Use a small notebook (one that can easily be transported) to keep up with events and who needs to go where. Including a calendar in the notebook might be of help. Also write down all the people for whom you plan to buy gifts, ideas for each gift and a price point for each. If there is a specific toy that your child has seen in a newspaper ad, cut it out and staple it in the notebook, making note of the store. Having a picture will assist you and the store clerk in finding the item. *Hint: This is top-secret information, so don't let the book get in the wrong hands!* Additionally, plan holiday meals and list menu items that you'll need to purchase. You can keep recipes in the notebook for quick reference.

Keeping up with receipts will help you stay on budget and are needed for returns. To make this task easy, staple an envelope on the inside or back cover of the notebook and place each receipt in it as you make a purchase.

At the end of the season, you can tally your receipts for a sum of holiday expenditures.

Laugh. Love. Live!

Did you know that laughter is a powerful antidote to stress? It relaxes your muscles for up to 45 minutes after and releases endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemical. So, do a lot of it this holiday. Get together with family and friends and share humorous stories and jokes or watch a comedy together. (info from www.helpguide.org)

Savor the season by spending time with those you cherish and forgiving those you don't. Rekindling estranged relationships just might be the cure for your stress.

Like every year, the holidays will come and go and they'll be over before you know it. You only get one chance a year to enjoy the fa-la-la-las, so decide what makes the holidays special to you and your family. Treasure the season and remember that you set the tone for your family.

Holiday Money-Saving Tips:

Host pot-luck dinners where everyone brings a dish or decide to alternate host locations.

Draw names for gifts instead of giving to every person or play White Elephant, just with desirable gifts. Either way, set a price-limit.

Wrap gifts with butcher paper, decorating with ink stamps and top with a bow. Or spray old paint cans and decorate with glitter, stuff with tissue paper and the gift.

If you have the time, make gifts such as homemade jam and cookies. These make great gifts for teachers, neighbors and church staff.

Give family gifts instead of individual gifts.

Buy items for next year on the few days following this year's holiday.

Keep holiday clothing simple: A red sweater out of your closet with a newly purchased scarf is a timeless combination.



The time of giving is upon us, so it's a perfect opportunity to reflect on what true giving is.

For many, the holidays are a happy, joyful time, surrounded by family and friends. For others, it's a lonely time, made worse by the fact that those around them are celebrating.

The exchanging of money and material goods is commonplace and simple. We give and in return get back. There's a deeper level to giving and it's called: giving of yourself.

In early years, giving was actually "giving up", a giving away of one's self, not of one's means. People gave of their time and energy as opposed to monetary gifts. With the age of affluence, entered materialism. And unselfish acts and words were replaced with giving to please the giver and not the gifted.

There's a saying: **a present is something you give because you want the recipient to have it. A gift is something the recipient actually wants** (paraphrased).

How many neckties have dads received? How many men have been successful in picking out the right style, let alone size, for their beloved? Do we give just for the sake of giving or do we really think about what the other person needs? And not material things, things of the heart?

Mark Twain once said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment." For many, a simple word of encouragement is the best gift they could

ever receive. For others, it may be an hour of your undivided attention. "Quality time is more than mere proximity" says Gary Chapman, author. Putting away the cell phone, turning off the TV and focusing on the other person, is a gift worth millions.

Sometimes simple acts of service like mending a shirt or repairing a leaking faucet speak louder than any material gift.

As you go through these next few months, think of those who might be forgotten: the homeless, the elderly, the disabled, and poor. Think of ways that you can give to them, whether it's visiting a nursing home

or a widowed neighbor. Perhaps a lady down the street is unable to care for her yard. Many shelters need volunteers to spend time with the homeless. You don't have to look far, even in your own home, to find ways to give of your heart. There is only one rule: do it out of love, not out of obligation or with the hope of getting anything in return. In doing this you'll have learned the true art of giving!

